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# "We're Gonna Figure This Out": First-Generation Students and Academic Libraries

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# “We’re Gonna Figure This Out”: First-Generation Students and Academic Libraries

Abstract: Although extensive research has looked at first-generation college students’ experiences, very little has examined the role of the library. This article reports the results of an asset-based exploratory study understanding the experiences of first-generation college students at three universities. Key findings of this study focus on themes of self-advocacy, sense of belonging, library customization, and integration of the library with the larger campus. This article discusses these key themes in the context of improving library services and spaces, ultimately providing more inclusive resources for all student groups. Implications and recommendations for professional practice are discussed.

## Introduction

First-generation students (FGS) often encounter structural barriers on campus that enforce expectations of tacit knowledge. A variety of programs ranging from the federally funded TRIO programs to university-specific summer bridge initiatives attempt to reduce these barriers and acculturate FGS to the higher education landscape. Academic libraries often partner with these programs with aims of demystifying the academic library and introducing students to college-level research tools. However, many of these initiatives are designed to aid first-generation students in learning the “hidden curriculum” (i.e., the implicit vocabulary, procedures, and culture)[1] of attending college rather than dismantling the need for learning such curriculum.

Extensive research has been conducted on first-generation students' university experience, but such research often uses a deficit perspective, and the role of academic libraries is often neglected as a key factor of that experience. A team of researchers from three universities sought to explore the experiences of first-generation students to inform the design of library spaces, services, and initiatives and to recognize how the library might inadvertently contribute to structural barriers. Recognizing that this group is not a monolith, the researchers designed an exploratory study using an asset-based framework to investigate the academic lives of FGS while centering student voices and honoring previous experiences. In this paper, the authors describe using survey and interview data to report the experiences of FGS with academic libraries, including information literacy, spaces used for academic work, and sense of belonging. In addition to respecting students' previous experiences and existing knowledge, the use of an asset-based framework acknowledges the role of the hidden curriculum and structural barriers to success that are present in higher education, and can help researchers recommend practices that will eliminate these barriers and support student growth. Key findings of this study focus on themes of self-advocacy, sense of belonging, library customization, and integration of the library with the larger campus. This article discusses these key themes in the context of improving library services and spaces, ultimately providing more inclusive resources for all student groups, and includes implications for practice.

## Literature Review

Historically, much of the Library and Information Science (LIS) literature on FGS has been informed by deficit thinking that frames them as outsiders in higher education, as a problem to be solved, and as reluctant library users.[2] This deficit thinking positions learners as lacking and

unlikely to succeed in college, thereby "'blam[ing] the victim' for school failure rather than examining how schools are structured to prevent poor students and students of color from learning."[3]

One manifestation of deficit thinking in LIS literature is the idea that first-generation students are a singular group that "are different from other students, and they need help."[4] Another is the assumption that they lack preparation for overall success in college. Haras and McEvoy argued that "Some factors, such as first generation, minority, and low income status, place students at risk for academic failure and require early intervention."[5] Studies often use an incantation of negative trends to describe FGS, including lower ACT scores and grades as well as higher drop-out rates.[6] Addressing the ability of FGS to complete college-level library research specifically, Pickard and Logan found that they "struggled with a range of information literacy skills" and "appeared to perceive research as a single-step endeavor rather than as a process."[7] Wagner observed that non-traditional students (including FGS) "approach the academic library as if it were a dangerous pit of intellectual quicksand" which they attempt to avoid because of the perceived time required to learn research skills.[8] Taken together, these instances of deficit thinking offer a grim understanding of the abilities, characteristics, and motivations of FGS.

In response to deficit thinking, recent scholarship in LIS has advocated for the use of asset-based approaches in working with FGS. Arch and Gilman contend that the goal "should be to make our library services 'student-ready,' instead of expecting first-generation students (or any students) to be 'college-ready.'"[9] Asset-based approaches adjust the lens through which FGS are viewed, focusing on the strengths that students bring from their families, communities, and previous education; the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators advocates

using such an approach for working with first-generation students.[10] Morrison writes that, "Rather than forwarding the story of being placed at the margins," these approaches "tackle the colonial narrative by placing communities' cultural wealth alongside it, giving prominence to cultural wealth and assets."[11] Addressing information literacy instruction specifically, Folk posited that a "funds of knowledge approach to research assignments, one that is rooted in honouring the wealth of knowledge that students bring with them to college, may reframe research assignments as opportunities for marginalised students to engage academically."[12] Using critical race theory, hip-hop pedagogy, and autoethnography, Morrison transformed the IL classroom so that the backgrounds and knowledge that FGS bring with them, particularly relating to systemic oppression, could be used as a foundation for learning in higher education. Morrison concluded that "It is my students doing the intervention on me, doing intervention on the practice of information literacy instruction/definition for librarians."[13] In contrast with the deficit understanding of FGS as being at risk of failure and in need of intervention, the asset-based view asks what institutional interventions are needed so that libraries can work successfully with and for FGS.

In Morrison's study, the interplay of FGS status with other identities, particularly those related to race and ethnicity, highlights the importance of considering intersectionality when discussing FGS. They are not a homogenous group, but instead display a wide range of backgrounds and identities related to such factors as race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability status, as well as the intersection of those identities.[14] As with any student, FGS experience all their identities simultaneously, and all inform their understanding of higher education.

Other asset-based LIS research has explored self-advocacy and independence among first-generation students. Torres, Reiser, LePeau, Davis, and Ruder found that Latinx FGS

tended to seek information about college from friends and pamphlets first and only consulted with faculty or staff, such as advisors, once they had encountered a crisis.[15] Research shows that FGS develop informal networks of support when they feel official university support systems do not serve their needs.[16] This tendency toward independence and alternative support systems may mean that FGS solve problems without asking for help from library employees. However, as Long recommended in a study on Latinx FGS, in order to address this issue it is the library (rather than students) that should change through "greater and earlier outreach, the development of multicultural competencies, greater articulation of [its] purpose in student success, and engaging students culturally through a critical examination of [its] role in Latino students' lives."[17] In their study on FGS and library spaces, Neurohr and Bailey found that students create meaning in library spaces that go beyond the intended purpose set by the library.[18] The studies by Long and by Neurohr and Bailey discovered that FGS tend to make library resources and spaces fit their needs, sometimes despite the appearance of the library as less than welcoming, accommodating, or culturally appropriate.

Students' sense of belonging on campus is an important theme in LIS research on FGS. In one study, FGS expressed the sense of needing to catch up with their continuing-generation peers, "assum[ing] there was a 'system' to learn,'" and therefore feeling stressed and alienated.[19] Such implicit systems make up the hidden curriculum of higher education.[20] Folk emphasized that "the culture of higher education, which has its historical roots in white, patriarchal, middle- and upper-class, heteronormative values, may be alienating to students whose cultural backgrounds are different from the privileged culture(s)."[21] Research suggests asset-based interventions, such as relationship building through embedded librarianship[22] and instruction based on asset-based pedagogies,[23] have a place in addressing that alienation.

For a comprehensive review of FGS in higher education literature, see Spiegler and Bednarek;[24] see Ilett for a critical review of the LIS literature on FGS.[25]

## Institutional Context

This project was designed to explore the experiences of first-generation students at three public universities in a Mountain West state. Colorado State University (CSU), the University of Northern Colorado (UNC), and the University of Colorado Boulder (CU), are all public, doctoral-granting schools founded in the nineteenth century and located in north-central Colorado. The three universities were chosen because they have distinct educational missions while sharing a geographic area and the purpose to educate state residents. All three universities are Predominantly White Institutions, with white undergraduate enrollment rates of 72% (CSU), 58% (UNC), and 68% (CU) at the time of this study.[26]

These three universities vary in educational mission, size, and first-generation student enrollment and support (Table 1). Colorado State University (CSU) is the state's land-grant institution with a focus on agriculture and natural resources programs, including the extension service which serves the entire state of Colorado. In 1984, CSU became the first university in the nation to offer scholarships specifically for first-generation students. Later, CSU developed the First Generation University Initiative, a consortium of faculty, staff, and students that work together to develop strategies and provide support for first-generation student success. CSU librarians have intentionally engaged the Initiative's programs and services through outreach, collection development, research, and teaching, particularly within the last six years.

University of Northern Colorado (UNC) was founded as a normal school and continues to have a strong focus on educational degree programs. The Center for Human Enrichment

(CHE) at UNC houses Student Support Services/TRIO and the Academic Bridge program, both of which provide advising, mentoring, workshops, and other services to support FGS. UNC employs a librarian whose primary role is to serve as liaison between CHE and the library by teaching and mentoring FGS students, assessing programs, and collaborating with CHE faculty.

The University of Colorado Boulder (CU) is the flagship state university with strong engineering, business, and liberal arts programs. There is a range of campus-wide offices, programs, services, and scholarships for first-generation students and/or underrepresented student populations, with some programs and services limited to students enrolled in certain colleges and schools. The library creates connections with these programs primarily through subject liaisons assigned to the college or department.

| University | Undergraduate Enrollment | First-Generation Students | Survey Responses | Interview Participants |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Colorado State University (CSU) | 24,742 | 5,962 (24%) | 407 | 17 |
| University of Northern Colorado (UNC) | 8,211 | 3,488 (42%) | 398 | 14 |
| University of Colorado Boulder (CU) | 27,665 | 4,782 (17%) | 96 | 17 |

Table 1. First-generation student demographics of three public Colorado universities

## Methods

Each university used a common research protocol, approved by each site's Institutional

Review Board, to collect data in two phases. In the first phase, a survey was disseminated to first-generation students at each university. In the second phase, a subset of survey respondents participated in a qualitative, semi-structured interview based on themes that emerged from the survey and questions identified by the research team. Small incentives were provided for participating in the survey and interviews, including a $10 Amazon gift card and entry into a drawing for a bookstore gift certificate.

*Survey Development and Administration*

The research team created a 19-question survey which was distributed using Qualtrics software. The survey was designed to capture demographic information; identities students associate with themselves; and frequency of use, comfort with, and perceived importance of library resources, spaces, and services. Additionally, the survey contained open-ended questions encouraging students to share experiences on their home campuses, barriers to success, and any additional comments. Dissemination of the survey varied by university. At CSU and UNC, the offices of institutional data provided the research team with a list of email addresses for students classified as first-generation based on admissions data. At CU Boulder, no such list could be acquired, so researchers leveraged connections with programs supporting first-generation students. This resulted in some programs providing a list of email addresses for students, while others shared the invitation through newsletters or listservs. Across the three institutions, 901 students responded to the survey (Table 1).

*Interview Development*

The researchers reviewed survey responses and found common threads across the three universities. These included feelings of comfort and safety in the library, the challenge of

assumed knowledge for navigating the library and campus resources, and the impact of both services (e.g., printing and parking) and staff approachability on respondents' use of library spaces and services. Additionally, respondents raised concerns from their personal lives, such as difficulty paying for textbooks, that intersected with library usage. Finally, many respondents described how they learned library systems or expressed a desire to learn more about how the library worked. The research team used this information to create a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A), agreeing to a core set of five questions which would be asked of all interview participants with additional prompts to guide the discussion if needed. Team members at each university had the option to develop additional questions to examine themes, issues, or areas of inquiry specific to their locations.

*Interview Data Gathering and Analysis*

Members of the research team emailed the 377 survey respondents who indicated interest in a follow-up interview to invite them to participate. Interviews were conducted in library meeting rooms during normal business hours and were audio recorded. Each interview participant completed a brief demographic survey before beginning the interview. A total of 48 students across the three universities were interviewed. Of the students interviewed, 23% (n=11) identified as transfer students and 94% (n=45) attended school full-time. Interview participants ranged in age from 18 to 43 but overwhelmingly were under the age of 25 (n=45). Interview participants from all three institutions were predominantly white with Hispanic/Latino being the next highest population represented (see Figure 1). Some races/ethnicities, notably American Indian/Alaska Native, were not represented at any of the three universities; at CU, no Black or African-American students participated in interviews. All three institutions had more women than men participate at the interview stage (see Figure 2).

[Insert Figure 1]

[Insert Figure 2]

The interviews solicited information about students' experiences on individual campuses; their interaction with library spaces, resources, and services; and their approach to academic work. Interview recordings were transcribed using dictation software, with additional editing completed by a member of the research team from the participant's home campus. Interviews were then loaded into Dedoose qualitative data analysis software and coded using a hybrid approach.[27] The research team drafted a code book to serve as a framework, based on the focus of the research project, themes identified in the survey, and areas of specific interest to each university. Each interview was then coded by a researcher from the participant's home campus and reviewed by at least one other team member from another institution. Team members had the ability to add codes as needed, and the team met to discuss the scope and necessity of codes throughout the analysis process. The Principal Investigator removed or merged duplicate codes and made final decisions on any lingering coding questions. After all interviews were coded, the research team used Dedoose to explore patterns in the codes, pose questions, and review excerpts.

## Findings

The interviews revealed several themes relating to how FGS use academic libraries, including self-advocacy, sense of belonging and identity, library customization, and integration of the library with the larger campus. These results are not intended to represent the complete range of

views or ideas expressed by students in the interviews, but are guiding points to discuss how academic libraries can support first-generation students and reduce structural barriers.

*Self-advocacy*

One major theme that emerged in the interviews was student self-advocacy: how students were able to navigate library structures to access needed resources and assistance. Many students reported high levels of comfort asking for the help and materials they needed, as illustrated by one student commenting, "I feel pretty confident in that. I know that there's a lot of stations around the library that have people that I can ask." Many students tied their initiative or motivation directly to their experience as FGS, which they said had made them more inclined to engage in trial and error, open to seeking help, or willing to figure things out on their own; for example: "I kind of self-taught, as one does. First-gen students, I noticed that whenever I've done other group work with first-gens, we're very, like, we're gonna figure this out." Another student described themselves as "forward thinking" and "risk-taking" because of their FGS status.

Some students reported barriers to seeking help and navigating library resources, including discomfort or hesitance asking for help because they were not sure if their question would be perceived as something they were already expected to know, reinforcing the idea of the hidden curriculum that FGS may face. For example, with regard to asking for help, one student commented, "You know, it's kind of intimidating, 'cause I feel like I should already know." Another student noted, "It is a little different just coming here and feeling like everyone else has guidance, and I don't really have guidance." All three libraries employ students to staff public service points, and some interview participants noted that they were more comfortable asking for

help from these students, who physically appeared to be the same age and therefore more approachable. One participant shared, “You assume adults that are a little older and out of school know everything and you don’t want to be that person to ask them a dumb question. Or something that they are going to be like, ‘Oh, you don’t know that?’ But a student isn’t really going to be like that because they are learning alongside you.” Another student reported, “A library run by students is just a library run by people who are in the same boat as you.” Several participants also noted that they knew student employees from other contexts, such as a former TA or friend of a sibling, and that they appreciated seeing familiar faces. One student remarked that seeing student employees was valuable because it emphasized the role of the library as a university employer. However, some students did report hesitance to interrupt or difficulty getting the attention of visibly occupied employees, and several commented that they found student employees were unapproachable if they were working on homework or talking to each other.

In addition to using library service points, students also noted that they sought research help from others, including professors, advisors, and other students. Some participants also reported instances of helping other students, including one who has encouraged other students to use library resources, “I actually happen to know about this resource and, telling other students about that, they’re usually, like, ‘What?’ And, like, ‘That’s amazing.’ ‘Like, yeah, you should totally use it.’” Overall, students reported a strong sense of self-advocacy related to their first-generation status, but also expressed barriers they encountered, both institutional and structural barriers.

*Sense of Belonging*

Students also indicated their use of the library space was related to whether they felt the space welcomed and respected them as individuals, including their identities as FGS and all their intersecting identities. Often, they associated a productive library space with a safe, inclusive environment. A participant commented that "this is a place that you can come whenever you have stuff to do and you are not going to be subject to any discrimination or judgment, I guess. People come here for all the same reasons: to study." Another student reported, similarly, "there's no real hate. It's really calm. You know, everyone is there to, everyone is there for the same reason. [...] So nobody really cares by that point how someone is or what they are doing. I feel it is a safe zone." Some students also connected their library experience explicitly to their FGS status; for example: "The library's very helpful. [...] It's a great place for resources and everything, and I love being in here. So, I mean, it's helped out a lot with me struggling, with my family not knowing what I'm doing."

Many participants discussed intersecting identities, such as socioeconomic status and race, and noted that those identities also impacted whether they felt welcome in the library and on their home campus more broadly. Some connected class status to their experience as FGS; for example: "It definitely can be, I think, a source of more stress for first-generation students cause generally the parents are not as socioeconomically well off as people who had gone to college. Like that's just how the system works." However, some students commented that their FGS status was often conflated with low socioeconomic status, contrary to their personal experience. Still other participants shared the tension they felt between the identities they held compared to the ones stressed by the university community. One student of color commented that "it seems like being a first-generation student is more celebrated here than my other identities" and that

their racial identity was minimized. This same participant shared that it was often a challenge to be the only student of color in their classes and other university spaces but felt “The library already does, like, a lot for me to overcome it. It gives me a place to study and, just, be me and hang out.” Students saw inclusivity of their identities as an essential part of a useful study space, connecting freedom from discrimination and judgment directly to their ability to study successfully.

Participants also expressed appreciation for services and programs that emphasized student well-being, including a substantial number of references to free coffee and tea, therapy dogs, and supportive programming. One student remembered that “They had, like, free food, they had some pizza and some water and some stuff like that, and so just the fact that there’s a lot of people here that, like, care about the people that go here and want to make sure that they’re doing all right.” Another student reported that they use a particular library because “there’s always like tea and cookies, and the front desk workers are just always really nice and they always say hi and there’s like a white board of random daily questions and it just feels so different that I really enjoy it.” These gestures of care resonated with students, and many reported feeling greater connections to the library because of them.

Students did not express many concerns about sense of belonging specific to the library, but some reported privileging other campus spaces that supported them in robust ways. One participant noted that she spent most of her spare time on campus at a space that is part of a first-generation student program, saying, “They provide space, and, like, I commute from home so I don't want to go out and buy lunch every day so they provide, there’s like a fridge, a microwave, there’s just like things that are needed that you can just take advantage of. There’s free printing,

there's computer access...it's a really good support network." Participants strongly associated a safe space for varying student identities with a conducive study environment.

*Library Customization*

Another key theme was the high value students placed on being able to customize the library for their own needs and to find a space for themselves within the library. This theme came up most often with respect to different study types and noise levels, and it emerged at all three institutions, even though they have significantly different floor plans and furniture. For example, one student reported, "So there's always somewhere you can go to just get away and just either relax or study or just, you know, just do whatever you need to do in the library. But there's that also, there's another section where you can be with your friends, and you can be talking, [...] and nobody's really minding [...] So I think that's really cool about how there's like a social aspect library, a group aspect to the library, and then there's like an individual more quiet, relaxed aspect [...] I think that's kind of essential to have in a library." Students also appreciated that they could express their use of the space to others; for example, one student described how one of the libraries provided "a little tent that says 'If you need a place to work you can sit with me.' So, like, people that are sitting alone, they'll like, put it out and then, like, so then someone doesn't feel bad about sitting at their space." Overall, students valued a wide range of features that allowed them to customize and adapt the library space.

Some comments on customization specifically referenced stereotypes or negative understandings of libraries, and other comments suggested students' uncertainty regarding their relationship to the space and their ownership of it. For example, one student shared, "Stereotypically when people think of libraries, they think of, like, quiet. They think of, like,

librarians walking around. And I have never experienced that. If there is staff, they are there to help and it's friendly. And it's never, 'What are you doing here?' Or, 'Can you be quieter?' Or anything like that." The idea that library employees could play a policing role was perceived by some students as a possible barrier. Some of the negative comments about the library related to policies about how students could not use the space, such as restrictions on eating or talking in certain areas or not being able to find an appropriate space for their needs.

Students mentioned customization and relevance in discussions of instruction and reference, as well. In two of the three institutions, there is standardized library instruction that primarily occurs in first-year composition classes. Although students generally found instruction to be helpful, some reported that the one-size-fits-all model did not fit them. For example, some of the FGS interviewed were transfer students, who often miss first-year instruction altogether. One transfer student, after commenting that they had missed orientation, suggested a FGS-specific orientation session, "and to target that towards, like, first-generation students who, maybe, have been around for a little while and, kinda be like, 'Hey, we recognize maybe you'd had to navigate this and you've tried to build your own systems and we wanna, like, talk to you about how you've done that and also show you some, like, tools and tricks, and how do you be more efficient.'" This was a request for group-specific instruction that also acknowledges previous experiences, identities, and self-taught strategies.

Students often emphasized flexibility and relevance in talking about whether an interaction was helpful; for example: "They helped me figure out how to print, how to find the journal articles I needed for my papers, kind of good places to go, depending on what I needed." Students also expressed a variety of preferences in terms of how library services are promoted, including flyers, brochures, and customized events. One student requested "a little posterboard or

something that was, like, ‘meet your librarian’”, so information about librarians was more accessible in public spaces. In general, applicability to specific personal needs seemed to be a large factor in student valuation of library spaces and services.

*Integration with Campus*

The final theme identified was how FGS perceived the connection between the library and other university spaces, services, and aspects of their lives. Higher education institutions tend to have arbitrary, institution-specific distinctions that are not always recognized by students. These factors, while not always within library control, nevertheless have a significant impact on student use of the library and perception of library services and spaces. This was prevalent in student interviews when participants discussed the ease of getting to the library, in terms of parking, bus routes, and relative location to other points on campus. Students frequently mentioned availability of parking and bus routes as relevant to their library use; for example, one student reported they did not use the library because of parking, summarized as, “the library’s fine, other than me getting to the library”. This sentiment was echoed by students across all three institutions, indicating that the cost and location of parking presented a challenge for accessing the library. Although the library has no control over parking, it affects whether students can get access to necessary resources.

Participants also identified the relationship between the library and other important buildings on campus (e.g., residence halls, the student center), as a key factor in library use. For example, at one university, the main library is located in the geographic center of campus, directly adjacent to the student center. Students described using the library because it is “literally the center of campus.” However, participants also requested that the library provide an array of

generalized services because of its convenient location—for example, that the library hold information sessions on tutoring because the main building where tutoring is conducted is significantly farther away. At another university, the two libraries are situated on either end of campus which made location a factor although students were divided about its impact. For one participant, they considered the library to be on the other side of campus and shared "I'm going to admit it. I don't wanna walk all the way over to the library." This student expressed bewilderment that the student center is more centrally located than the library, making it an easier gathering and study space.

Students also discussed the connection between the library and other campus services, often requesting greater collaboration or integration. These comments covered a fairly wide range of services and programs, including instruction and service desks. For example, one student requested more library involvement in assignment planning: "I'd like to see more of a connection between, like, the Business College and the library on looking, like, maybe setting up assignments that work." This comment suggests that students may also be interested in greater integration of library instruction into their disciplinary studies.

Multiple students requested that the library research desk provide information not just about the library, but about all of campus: "Like the Help Desk could give you resources on everything, not just—like, [the university] as a whole, not just on the library." Some libraries in this study also host independent support services in the same building, such as tutoring, disability services, and writing centers. Students often referred to these resources as library services, indicating that they do not necessarily recognize institutional distinctions among campus departments that seem related but need to be navigated independently, and that FGS are looking for ways to get overall, cohesive support.

Relatedly, students also tied library services and spaces to other aspects of their personal and academic lives. Many reported that financial pressures were a major concern, and the topic came up in a range of comments about the library, especially regarding services and difficulty finding other study spaces. Students often valued free services and resources available to them as part of their student status. As one participant noted, "It was nice to get an overview of just the resources and stuff because I feel like even now I learn about stuff we have for free as students [...] and you're like 'Wait, you get that for free?' [...] I swear it's like something new every day that you're like, 'I can get that for free here?'" Issues of cost came up around several areas, including coffee and tea, printing, laptops, textbooks, and parking. One student reported that the library was a good study place because "you don't have to buy coffee" to be there. For students who shared that they lived at home to save money, access to library study spaces was important to their success since they often had difficulty studying at home either due to lack of space or disruptive younger siblings. Although many of these factors are traditionally considered irrelevant to library decision making, the findings suggest that they had a major impact on how and when students used the library, and it is important to consider how they affect use of critical support resources.

## Limitations

The data came from three doctoral-granting public universities with close geographic proximity within one state. Without random sampling and a wider participant pool, it is not possible to make generalizations based on the data reported here. Additionally, survey dissemination differed at one university (CU Boulder), leading to an overrepresentation of students from the

College of Engineering and Applied Sciences for both the survey and interview portions of the project.

Interview participants self-selected to engage in follow-up discussions with members of the research team, which may have skewed the results in favor of students who had a particularly positive or negative view of the library. This convenience sample meant that our interview participants did not match overall campus or FGS demographics. All three universities had greater rates of women interview participants than men compared to university FGS demographics. Additionally, interview participants did not represent all races and ethnicities. However, the qualitative information the research team gathered presented a rich picture of student experiences across the three universities, providing a foundation to begin understanding the role of the academic library for first-generation students.

## Discussion and Conclusion

### *Implications for Professional Practice*

The findings have implications for library practice broadly and for working with first-generation students specifically. They suggest best practices, such as recognizing student self-advocacy, reducing barriers related to the hidden curriculum of higher education, and creating programming and services that are inclusive of all identities. Although the findings were derived from analysis of conversations with FGS and represent an effort to express their experiences in their own words, working towards these objectives would likely be helpful to all students, particularly groups that are often marginalized, including international students, undocumented students, students of color, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds—groups that often have a high degree of overlap with first-generation students.

Library employees rarely know they are working with FGS except when collaborating with a support program for this population, such as the TRIO programs, and the definition of a first-generation student can vary even within a university. FGS may be difficult or impossible to identify and therefore to target for outreach or services. This issue may be compounded by the tendency among FGS toward self-advocacy or independent problem solving. Therefore, services for and interactions with students are more inclusive if library employees do not assume knowledge of the hidden curriculum of higher education and academic libraries. Possible strategies include designing user-friendly websites, advocating for the creation of more intuitive search tools from vendors, and avoiding or explaining jargon. Libraries can also appeal to the tendency toward self-advocacy by providing tools for self-guided learning in various formats. Further, when library employees know they are working with FGS, they can engage in conversations with these students and with the programs designed to support them to understand local contexts, identify any unintentional barriers, and implement necessary changes.

Participants spoke of the ways they customize library spaces and services to make them their own and to serve their needs. Libraries can accommodate this trend by inviting students to use spaces and materials in ways that make sense for them and to encourage a sense of ownership of library spaces. They can offer spaces that vary in size (group and individual), noise level, lighting, foot traffic, and furniture types. Offering multiple modes of communication, including in person, chat, phone, email, and social media appeals to different comfort levels and allows students to seek help at any time. Various types of instruction, from online learning tools to one-on-one research consultations to group instruction, also appeal to students' different preferences. Instruction can also be targeted and responsive to FGS while honoring previous experience, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach for all students.

In this study, FGS generally expressed comfort in using library spaces and in asking for assistance. Their sense of the library as a safe, non-judgmental space contributed directly to their ability to use library resources and spaces to their full advantage. However, to foster inclusivity and combat the "overwhelming Whiteness of the academic library profession,"[28] libraries could reconsider policies regarding library spaces; hire diverse staff at all levels, including student staff, whom FGS often find more relatable and welcoming; eliminate inherent biases in retention and promotion practices; and implement critical pedagogical methods in instruction and reference services.[29] Libraries could also develop inclusive, culturally sustaining programming related to students' identities and communities as well as feature art and exhibits that represent the cultural backgrounds of underrepresented or Indigenous students at the institution. Such programming, along with small gestures of care, such as snacks and activities designed to alleviate stress, communicates to students that the library is concerned about their success and well-being.

Findings also suggested that students do not perceive the library as a distinct unit of the larger institution. Many students see everything offered in a library building as a library service, and they view services related to their library use, such as printing and parking, as being under the purview of the library. The degree to which library services and spaces integrate seamlessly into students' daily routines is a measure of the success of those services. Libraries can capitalize on this in a number of ways. They can serve, as participants suggested, as a local information hub concerning all units on campus and in the community. Libraries can advocate with various logistical units on campus to ensure that the library buildings are easily accessible. They can partner with service providers and with campus organizations related to students' intersecting identities to provide support services and culturally sustaining programming and services in the

library. Finally, libraries can collaborate with programs that support FGS specifically to incorporate the library into students' higher education experience. Ideally, the library is an integrated part of students' overall college life.

In this study, some participants expressed negative, stereotypical viewpoints about library employees, including the sense that they were there to monitor the space and enforce rules, or that they might call out students for asking dumb questions. This finding indicates that it is especially relevant to continue efforts to make library employees more approachable, in order to provide inclusive service to all students.

Though FGS often display self-advocacy and problem-solving skills, it is incumbent on libraries to remove the barriers that perpetuate the need for these qualities in the first place. As Brook, Ellenwood, and Lazzaro observed, "Users of academic libraries whose needs are not being met have found ways around the barriers that library workers unintentionally construct."[30] In keeping with the asset-based framework, libraries must identify and eliminate those barriers. It is not FGS that are deficient and in need of intervention, but rather libraries and library employees that must strive to reduce barriers and improve access.

*Conclusion*

This exploratory study sought to understand in a holistic way how first-generation students experience their academic library. Using an asset-based approach, this project explored the strengths FGS bring with them to college, as well as barriers to access and success that libraries might inadvertently create. The researchers found that FGS tended to self-advocate, solved problems, and customized library resources and spaces. However, they also encountered barriers, including the hidden curricula of higher education and academic libraries, confusing

procedures and search tools, and sometimes unwelcoming library employees. Notably, students felt that the inclusivity and non-judgmental atmosphere they sensed in the library contributed directly to their productivity. Future research could explore the factors that make students perceive the library as an inclusive space compared to campus more broadly. It could also examine the ways in which FGS status intersects with other identities, both in terms of students' assets as well as structural barriers related to those intersectional identities. Finally, future research could compare the experiences of FGS and continuing-generation students to highlight further the inequities unintentionally perpetuated by academic libraries.

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